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ABSTRACT

Graduation and persistence rates were compared for 184 students, 92 of whom had repeated multiple courses or at least 1 course 3 times. A control group of 92 nonrepeating students was drawn from the remaining 303 students of the entire 1996 cohort. There was no difference between the graduation rate of repeaters and nonrepeaters. The persistence rate of the nondegreed repeaters was substantially greater than that of nonrepeaters throughout the 4-year study. Use of advisors was more frequent for the nondegreed repeaters than their nondegreed counterparts. This behavior suggests a difference in strategy when faced with failure. Repeaters do not change their tactics. Nonrepeaters withdraw to seek alternative routes. Both strategies enable similar numbers to graduate successfully. (Author/SLD)

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Strategy When Faced With Failure:
Persistence and Degree Attainment of Course Repeaters versus Non-Repeaters

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Strategy When Faced With Failure:
Persistence and Degree Attainment of Course Repeaters versus Non-Repeaters

Abstract: Graduation and persistence rates were compared for 184 students. Ninety-two students repeated multiple courses or at least one course three times. A control group of ninety-two (92) non-repeating students was drawn from the remaining 303 students in the 1996 cohort. There was no difference between the graduation rate of Repeaters compared with Non-repeaters. The persistence rate of the non-degreed Repeaters was substantially greater than Non-repeaters throughout the four-year study. Use of advisors was more frequent for the non-degreed Repeaters than their non-degreed counterparts. This behavior suggests a difference in strategy when faced with failure. Repeaters do not change their tactic. Non-repeaters withdraw to seek alternative routes. Both strategies enable similar numbers to successfully graduate.

Strategy When Faced With Failure:
Persistence and Degree Attainment of Course Repeaters versus Non-Repeaters

INTRODUCTION

Faculty concerns over the number of students repeating multiple courses or a course three or more times led to a study of student outcomes relating to persistence and degree completion over a four- year period for 1996-97 entering students enrolled in a two-year technical college. Like the majority of two-year institutions, the school has an open enrollment admission policy. The result is a diverse student body regarding academic preparation.

Thirty percent of the entering freshmen who submit an ACT score self-report that they have not completed a core high school curriculum. About 80% of the student body is 21 years old or over, and half are older than 24. The typical student has been out of school for several years prior to enrolling. Over 70% of the student body initially received a recommendation for developmental placement in one or more subjects. Twenty-three percent of the students repeat courses. Student outcomes were examined to determine whether course repetition policies assist the student in achieving degree completion, or should be made more restrictive to force students to choose another direction while they still have the time, resources, and commitment to pursue higher education.

BACKGROUND

Consequences of Open Door Admissions Policies

Traditionally, the mission of the two-year colleges has been to meet the educational needs of their respective communities. As a result, these institutions have practiced an open-door policy of accommodating all in search of additional education. The student bodies are diverse with respect to the reason for attending. Student motivation ranges from exploring an interest, getting up to date with a few courses, transitioning back to the workforce, seeking certification or licensure for a career move, preparing to transfer to a four-year program, or seeking a two-year associate degree.

Fundamentally, colleges are businesses driven to grow their customer base. The result is that students who are recruited for two-year institutions today may never have considered coming to college in prior generations due to the competing opportunities offered by a vigorous economy. Now the industrial job base has eroded in many communities and has been replaced by lower paying service sector jobs. These economic changes have motivated people to return to education as the pathway to a new career that will bring increased income and quality of life. Over 85% of respondents to a Student Opinion Survey conducted at the author's technical college in the Fall of 2000 cited a major job change in the past 18 months as the biggest factor influencing their return to school.

The age range at two-year colleges is similarly wide. The student who enters directly from high school is often referred to as the traditional college student. This population segment only represents about 20% -45% of the entering class at two year institutions, depending on their rural or urban settings and articulation agreements with nearby four-year institutions. Along with the age variation, comes a variation in readiness to learn.

Readiness to Learn

The past twenty-five years have been dominated by a quest to grow the number of citizens participating in higher education to position the workforce to accommodate rapid changes in technology, to address an increased need for communication skills that facilitate team work, and to promote higher level thinking skills to aid problem-solving in the work place. In addition to preparing for the tumultuous and highly competitive work place, students today bring socioeconomic, personal and academic readiness issues with them to their chosen program of study. The majority of entering two-year college students need remediation or developmental work before embarking on their college program coursework. Northern Essex Community College (FIPSE-2000 Proposal) analyzed entry level assessment data illustrating entering students deficiencies in basic and integrated learning skills. Over half (53%) of the Northern Essex students enrolled in 1999 required one or more developmental courses prior to enrolling in credit courses. The State of Ohio described similar remediation levels provided by its two-year colleges in a report to the Governor in Fall, 2001. Glendale College (CA), which partnered with Northern Essex Community College, reported 88% of its 1999 entry class lacking college-level skills in English and/or Math.

Two kinds of developmental students are recognized: students who did not complete a core curriculum in high school but who elect to come to college within a few years of high school graduation. These students probably did not anticipate continuing their education and generally have weak study skills and a poor foundation in basic reading, writing, math and science knowledge. The second student group is over 21, and has been out of school several years. They may or may not have been academically weak high school students. Nonetheless,their study and testing skills may be rusty and their recall of basic high school curriculum information may be poor.

Placement tests pinpoint the existence of the remediation problem for entering students, but typically students are not re-tested for placement if they successfully complete remedial course work. Course repetition may be linked to the adequacy of the remedial effort. However, this is beyond the scope of this article.

The majority of both groups requiring remediation also enter college at risk of non-completion due to a range of economic, social and cultural barriers that distract from their ability to focus on their school work. The Ohio Governor's Performance report found the majority of students attending two-year colleges were the first in their families to attend college and came from households with less than $50,000 annual income. Lack of family support or recognition of the need to study outside of class has been observed anecdotally by student advisors.

More two-year students are part-time than full-time, and the majority work at least 20 hours a week. Many have families to care for while handling employment and education. Older students generally contribute to a household and may have responsibilities for aging or ill parents as well. There is clearly a limited amount of time outside the classroom which can be devoted to school work. Lack of control brought on by few resources and limited time to invest in education places these students at high risk of non-completion. Course repetition may be one way these students have to sequester enough time to adequately digest the course material.

Accountability for Performance

Are repeating students clogging labs, crowding lecture halls, and using precious state education resources ineffectively ? This is a salient and timely issue in higher education because state governments are exercising performance oversight by monitoring degree completion; time to completion; and post-graduation employment, among other factors. Pressure for accountability by policy makers has given rise to use of these performance indicators, which are tied more to economic development and job readiness than the needs of the learner. They ignore the diverse reasons people attend two-year institutions and are not comprehensive in their ability to capture student success. This limitation is recognized even though the current study focuses on degree completion, retention, time to completion, and employment.

Course Repetition Policies

Do colleges support course repetition? Currently, students may repeat courses taken by audit or credit. Each course and each grade earned by the student are indicated in the student's permanent record, but only the higher grade earned initially in a course, or its first repetition, will be used in determining the student's cumulative grade point average. All subsequent repetitions will be included in the cumulative average. All attempts remain part of the permanent record. A survey of course repetition policies identified through an on-line search of college web pages and minutes of college faculty associations found little variation in these policies across campuses nationwide.

The University of Colorado at Boulder has announced a Course Forgiveness pilot program for the Summer and Fall of 2002. Under this program, students who earned less than a C- are permitted to repeat the course with the original grade excluded from calculation of the total credit hour calculations and their grade point average. The program has 11 rules proscribing and limiting the repetitions. The most restrictive rule is a 10 credit hour cap on the total number of undergraduate repetitions ,and a one course limit on graduate work, excluding the graduate programs of Law and Business Administration, which are not participating in the pilot. And only one repeat under course forgiveness will be allowed.

Two studies were found which identified a data-based rationale for limiting the number of repetitions permitted and shed light on how widespread course repeating is. Joe

Gerda reasoned from data on the College of the Canyons, CA students who repeated classes in the Spring , 1995 that 90% of a random sample needed only 1 repetition to achieve a satisfactory grade and the average repetitions was 1.2. Therefore, it was recommended that the College allow two repetitions for students to succeed. Similarly, a study undertaken by Georgia Southern University because there were no limits on the number of repetitions permitted found the median number of courses repeated by the sample was 1. Nearly 54% of the study sample repeated at least one course. But only 6% repeated a course multiple times. It was concluded that a restrictive policy limiting the number of repetitions would not greatly impact the number of repetitions, but would add an administrative burden to the college. Importantly, 38.1% of the Georgia Southern students who repeated coursework had graduated by March, 1995 whereas only 28.7% of their non-repeating counterparts graduated.

With very little research reported on the topic of course repetition outcomes, the author's two-year technical institute with an annual Fall enrollment averaging 2,500 examined longitudinal data over 25 years, which identified 1.3% or 588 students who had repeated an average of 1.27 courses *a minimum of three (3) times each*. A look at the Top Five Repeated Courses for these students included two accounting courses, two (2) Communications courses (primarily Writing), and only one (1) developmental or remedial course in Math. Seventy-nine percent (79%) of these students only repeated 1 course three or more times. All together, 58% of these repeated course attempts eventually resulted in a successful completion with a C or higher. Students earned an B or better in a quarter (25.2%) of the courses they repeated a minimum of 3 times.
In this unpublished study, course outcomes were optimistically positive overall. This was not equally true for all subject areas. Students were least successful when repeating Math courses; only 36 % attained a final grade of C or higher.

SAMPLE

This post hoc descriptive study examined student outcome data for 184 students who first enrolled in college in the Fall of 1996. For purposes of this study, the 92 entering students who repeated multiple courses, or repeated at least one course three times, were identified as Repeaters. A control group consisting of ninety-two (92) students who did not repeat multiple courses, or any course at least three times, was drawn from the remaining 303 students in the 1996-97 entering cohort of 395 students. The control group were labeled Non-Repeaters.

MEASURES

Outcome data of both groups of students were tracked through May 2000 to determine graduation, persistence, and employment patterns for the four academic years following their college entrance in 1996. Student characteristics were compared using a chi square between groups for gender, age, financial aid status, developmental status, area of study, and use of advisors.

PROCEDURES

Permanent student records were reviewed to construct a list of all 1996-97 first time college students enrolled at the two-year technical college. A second list of all students who had repeated multiple courses, or at least one course three times, was compiled. The intersection of these two lists was used to identify all students who were first time enrollees during the 1996-1997 school year and were course Repeaters.
There were a total of 92 students in the Repeaters group. A control group of 92 students was randomly selected from the remaining 303 students in the cohort whose records showed that no multiple courses had been repeated nor had any one course been repeated a minimum of three times. Descriptive statistics were generated for the variables for both groups. The chi-square test was used to determine if the subgroups were homogenous.

RESULTS

Graduation Rates

There was no significant difference between the graduation rate of Repeaters (23.9%) compared with Non-repeaters (25%) by the Spring of 2001, five years after entering. Nor was there a significant difference between the 1996 cohorts' graduation rate (24.45% and the college as a whole (27.14%), suggesting that the study sample was likely representative of the general college population. Data from Spring 2002 show that six additional students from each group successfully graduated, six years after first entering school. Thus, the 2002 graduation rate of the Repeaters is 30.4% maintained comparability with the Non-repeaters (31.5%). The χ^2 (1,N=184) = .8732, $p > .05$
It should be noted that no information on student intent to seek a degree was obtained in this post hoc study so it is not known to what extent members of either group sought a degree as the purpose of their enrollment.

Table 1
Students Who Received a Degree/Certificate

	Repeaters (n=92)	Non-repeaters (n=92)
Degrees/Certificates	**22**[1]	**23**[2]
Business	3	2
Engineering	5	5
Health	10	5
Public Service	4	11
No Degree	**70**	**69**
Business	17	22
Engineering	5	10
Health	16	5
Public Service	2	13
General (across programs)	0	3
General Health	24	13
General Public Service	6	3

[1]18 degrees/5 certificates and one student awarded a degree & certificate = 23 degrees and certificates
[2]23 degrees/1 certificate & 1 student awarded dual degrees= 24 degrees/certificates
[3]In IPEDS 2000, Lima Technical College reported a 27.14 % graduation rate for the 1996-97 cohort.
[4]In Spring 2002, 6 additional students from each group graduated, bring the total graduates to 28 for Repeaters and 29 for Non-Repeaters.

Time To Degree Completion

Not surprisingly, Repeaters took an average of nearly 3 quarters longer to graduate than Non-repeaters. Still, considering the extent of course repetition shown in Table 4, only one additional 9-month academic year resulted in the degree. The state average time to completion for all technical colleges was 3.8 years accomplished in 122 quarter hours. The institution-wide average for 1999-2000 was 3.0 years, or 12 quarters. The time to completion for both groups is shown in Table 2. The range of the time to completion is shown in Table 3. Note that no Repeater withdrew before the fifth quarter while Non-repeaters began withdrawing after the first quarter.

Table 2
Time to Degree Completion by Average Number of Quarters Elapsed

	Repeaters (n=92)	Non-repeaters (n=92)
Degrees	13.73	10.91
No Degrees	11.3	6.17

Table 3
The Range of Elapsed Quarters By Degree Completion

	Repeaters (n=92)	Non-repeaters (n=92)
Degrees	9-20	7-16
No Degrees	4-20	1-18

Extent of Repetitions Among Degreed Repeaters

The study found that 23% of the 1996-97 cohort of entering freshmen repeated multiple courses or repeated at least one course three times. By Spring 2001, 22, or 23.9% of the Repeaters successfully graduated. These degreed Repeaters averaged 3.5 unique courses repetitions. Of these, 30% of the attempted courses were repeated more than twice before the degreed Repeaters succeeded. Only 1.25% of the attempted courses were repeated 4 or more times prior to success. Table 4 shows the distribution of course repetitions by the degreed Repeaters.

Table 4
Extent of Repetition By Degreed Repeaters

	Number of Unique Courses Repeated							
# of Courses	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
# of Degreed Repeaters w/ Multiple Attempts	1	7	3	4	5	0	1	1

[1]The mean = 3.64 ; the median is 3.5.
[2] 70% of the Degreed Repeaters were successful within two tries and an additional 28.75% were successful by the third repetition. Only 1.25% of the Repeaters needed to repeat a course four or more times before achieving a satisfactory grade of C or higher.

Retention and Persistence

The Repeaters exhibited significantly greater extended retention and persistence than the Non-repeaters. In fact, no Repeaters withdrew prior to completing 4 quarters whereas the Non-repeaters began withdrawing after the first quarter. The Retention rate is shown in Table 5. The average length of persistence for the four subgroups (Repeater status by Graduation status) is shown in Table 2.

Table 5
Percentage of Non-degree Students Persisting by Year

	Repeaters (n=70)	Non-repeaters (n=69)
1998	100%	84%
1999	91%	46%
2000	61%	30%
2001	36%	20%
2002	10%	0%

Surprisingly, the persistence rate of the non-degreed Repeaters was consistently and substantially higher than the persistence rate of the non-degreed Non-repeaters throughout the five-year period. This behavior suggests a difference in strategy when faced with failure. Repeaters do not change their tactic; they try again. The Control group of Non-repeaters withdraw quickly to re-assess and seek alternative routes. The data show both strategies enable similar numbers to successfully complete a college degree.

Employment

There was no significant difference between the degreed repeaters and the degreed non-repeaters regarding employment as determined by a graduate survey sent six months after graduation. The survey results are shown in Table 6. The χ^2 (1,N=45)=1.33, p=.25

Table 6
Employment by Course Repetition Status

	Employment in Field	Employment Unknown
Repeaters (n=22)	5	17
Non-repeaters (n=23)	9	14

The author recommends that a follow-up study five years after graduation examine the employment of both groups of degreed students to determine what differences, if any, exist between the Repeaters and the Controls regarding employee and employer satisfaction, earning power, and career history.

EDUCATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS

Age

There no significant differences among the subgroups for age. Age does not impact degree completion. Of interest, none of the students in either subgroups was younger than 21. The age distribution is shown in Table 7.

Table 7
Age by Repeater Status[3]

	< 21	21-24	25-28	29-35	>35
Repeaters[1]					
Degrees	0	9	6	2	5
No Degrees	0	31	17	11	11
Non-Repeaters[2]					
Degrees	0	13	5	1	12
No Degrees	0	36	7	14	16

[1] χ^2 (3,N=92) = 1.0864, p =.32
[2] χ^2 (3,N=92) = 6.2322, p =.12
[3] χ^2 (3,N=184) =4.512, p = .21

Gender

Gender was not significant for the subgroups (No degrees, Repeaters vs. Non-Repeaters: χ^2 (1, N=139) =3.0714, p = .089; Degreed, Repeaters vs. Non-Repeaters: χ^2 (1, N=45) =0.1794, p = .59. Moreover, the gender distribution of both groups was proportionate to that of the college student body.

Financial Aid

Faculty had originally suggested that the availability of financial aid was the likely explanation for the extraordinary persistence of the Repeaters shown in Table 5. But Financial Aid status was not a factor. Only 10% of both groups received aid.

Developmental Characteristics

Sixty-nine of all 184 students, or 37.5% received a developmental recommendation in one or more subject areas after placement testing. However, there was no difference in the developmental characteristics of any of the four subgroups. The chi square for the χ^2 (9, N=184) = .8796, p = .99 The chi-square for those with Degrees vs. those Without Degrees after 5 years was χ^2 (3, N=184) = 2.03, p = .54.

Further investigation examined the type of developmental recommendation received by the four subgroups: Math only; Reading only; Writing only, Science only; Math & Reading; Math, Reading & Writing; Math, Reading, Writing & Science. Again, no significant differences were found. χ^2 (7, N=69) =2.7842, p = .90.

Only one developmental course in Math was among the course repetitions undertaken by the degreed Repeaters.

Overall the graduation rate for developmental students across both Repeaters and Non-repeaters was a robust 30.43%; 21 of the 69 developmental students received a degree. This graduation rate is similar to the 27.14% for the institution as a whole.

Area of Study and Success by Division

Across subject areas, Repeaters were found more often in Health-related majors compared to Non-repeaters (54% vs. 25%). Non-repeaters were more often Public Service majors (29% vs. 13%). Similar numbers of both subgroups were found in the Business and Engineering divisions

More Repeaters were successful in Business (15%), Engineering (50%), and Public Service(67%) compared with Non-repeaters (Bus., 8%, Eng., 33%, PS,46%, respectively). Non-repeaters appear to be more successful in Health , with 38% of the Repeaters graduating in Health compared with 50% of the Non-repeaters.

Meeting with Advisor

No significant differences were found between students with degrees and those with no degrees regarding the number of meetings held with their advisors ($\chi 2$ (4, N=184) =3.09, p = .60). However, there is a significant difference among students who have No Degree who are Repeaters or Non-repeaters $\chi 2$ (4, N=139) = 19.6271, p < .001. Repeaters who have not achieved a degree meet with their advisors much more frequently than do their Non-repeating counterparts.

Among students who earned Degrees, there was no difference in advisor use ($\chi 2$ (4, N=45) = 0.759, p = .9568.

DISCUSSION

No student opinion or engagement data was available for this post hoc study. However, the fact that as many repeaters as non-repeaters completed a degree was unanticipated. Likewise, the surprising difference in the persistence rate and speed in which Non-repeaters begin withdrawing suggest a difference in strategy in the face of failure. This is supported by the difference in the number meetings that Repeater students without degrees have with their advisors compared to the non-degreed Non-repeaters.

Why would students remain in a setting where they appear unsuccessful, especially since the Repeaters display a persistent pattern of course repetition. Only one of the Repeaters repeated one course, albeit three times. The remaining Repeaters who were ultimately successful in obtaining a degree repeated more than three separate courses and two repeated 7 and 8 courses. And on the other hand, why do Non-repeaters jump ship so readily? Is there any relationship between their attitude toward failure and their academic behavior?

Deborah Kintner (2002) wrote an essay on the Fear of Failure in which she reminds us that achievers often overcome adversity on their way to success. Ms. Kintner describes a revealing explanation by Thomas Edison for why he persisted in testing thousands of potential filament materials on the way to inventing the light bulb. He didn't view the experiments as failures; he viewed them as opportunities to learn what didn't work. This may characterize our Repeaters.

In view of the older age of the students in the study sample, time is likely a resource stretched to its limits by demands from employment and family as well as school. The Repeater may repeat in order to ensure that sufficient time is available for the student to achieve mastery of the material. The first time through is equivalent to every student's in-class time. The second and any subsequent times through may be equivalent to successful student's out-of-class time. We know from studies on student engagement that time spent on the topic relates to academic success. Perhaps this is a strategy adopted by some, consciously or not, which results in a sufficient concentration of time to eventually achieve mastery. The Repeating student is likely defining success on his or her own terms and is less likely to be externally dependent on praise and encouragement. Psychologists refer to this trait as having *an internal locus of control.*

While risking taking the argument too far, the study of abnormal psychology offers additional support for viewing Repeaters' behavior as a protective and sometimes productive strategy for exerting control. In a discussion of the reasons why some victims are observed to repeat the trauma, Bessel van der Kolk, MD (2002) suggests that assuming responsibility for abuse allows the victim to replace feelings of helplessness with an illusion of control. van der Kolk reports that" victims of rape who inappropriately assume some responsibility for provoking the attack have a better prognosis for recovery than those who do not assume this false responsibility: it allows the locus of control to remain internal and prevent[s] helplessness." One can assume that it is unpleasant to persist in a course of action which presents so many challenges. Why do Repeating students choose to remain in a culture where their efforts are often judged wanting and labeled a failure? Maybe the persistence gives them a sense of control otherwise missing in their academic lives. Maybe faced with a multitude of alternative actions in the world outside academe, Repeaters return to what is known as preferable to the anxiety of the unknown.

The flip side of the Repeater's view of learning from experience may be the Non-repeaters' world view as described by Chris Argyris (Harvard Business Review, May-June 1991, page 100-101 . This student is likely to have been generally successful is other aspects of his or her life. In fact, for some Non-repeators, they may rarely have experienced failure. And because they have rarely failed, they have never learned how to learn from failure. Far from being a catalyst for change, suggests Argyris, the idea that the individual's performance is not at its best leads to guilty feelings. When asked to pinpoint the key problems, students operating with this mind set will point to external factors: the instructor was unreasonable; the work load was too great; their employer wouldn't give them sufficient time; their spouse was unsupportive; the library didn't have enough books on the topic, etc. Since the student feels embarrassed and guilty, s/he re-

gains a sense of equilibrium by taking action, even if it is non-productive. In this case, the action is withdrawal.

Recall that non-degreed Non-repeaters differed from non-degreed Repeaters by the frequency of meetings with their advisors. This action makes sense from the differing world views of the two groups. As yet unsuccessful Repeaters seek control by seeking out the advisor, acknowledging their difficulties and seeking advise about how to learn from their failure in order to be more successful in the future. Unsuccessful Non-repeaters do not seek to learn publicly from their failures; they engage in defensive behavior to mask their fear of failure and their embarrassment by it. They blame external factors beyond their control; ultimately, they choose to withdraw rather than struggle publicly.

The author theorizes that most Academic Advisors and Administrators are themselves successful Non-repeaters, given that all have successfully completed graduate school where nothing below a B is acceptable. Thus, they may inappropriately broadly direct struggling students to consider alternatives, rather than encouraging and supporting the students' proclivity to persist. Likewise, administrators may adopt policies that force a struggling student to withdraw or at the least are punitive. If the goal is degree attainment, the data suggest that course repetition policies should not penalize students by limiting repetition, or by averaging the old grade(s) with the new.

A second common assumption about learning described by Argyris is the belief that learning is largely a matter of motivation. But learning doesn't require only attitudes and commitment, it involves the reasoning used to design and implement action. Defensive thinking can be responsible for blocking learning even when the student has a strong commitment to achieve.

CONCLUSION

What can educational administrators do to support both groups? First, we can acknowledge the number of students who struggle, but who ultimately succeed. This phenomenon should be shared during orientation, advising sessions, and with the families of students. Students should not feel alone in their failure to succeed the first time. The sense of isolation may be increased at non-residential two-year campuses where many students are too busy to integrate through sharing with the campus community. Second, we can work at modularizing curriculum by objective clusters when longitudinal evidence shows that a given course is repeated by a large number of students. The more we learn about what specific skills sets or knowledge presents students with difficulties, the more we can tailor learning activities to achieve the desired end. Meanwhile, we can support research at the institutional level that will tell us if a student's locus of control dictates his or her response to course failure. Retention programs may be able to increase their productivity by acknowledging both world views and being aware of the student's locus of control.

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